



The Impact of Social Media in Triggering and Maintaining Eating Disorders



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Introduction

Eating disorders (EDs) are a group of illnesses in which a person experiences severe disturbances in their eating behaviours, which in turns leads to preoccupations with food, body weight and shape. Eating Disorders are multifactorial in causage (Table 1) However over the years, the number of patients with EDs have increased and this could be linked to the rise of social media sites, which provides further platforms for comparison to others. However evidence is limited due to the novelty of this idea.

Table 1: Causes of Eating Disorders (adapted from RcPsych, 2017)

Genetics: Some people are more vulnerable to EDs
Lack of an "off switch": Allowing maintenance of dangerously low calorie intake
Puberty: Range of physical and emotional changes can trigger EDs
Media/Social Pressure: 66% said social media has negative impacts on self esteem
Emotional Distress/Life Events: Bereavments, divorce etc

Aim

To identify whether social media impacts patients with eating disorders and whether certain activities on social media trigger and maintain negative feelings about weight and shape.

Method

A questionnaire was produced and provided to patients in 3 different inpatient eating disorder units across the UK, followed by informal (optional) group feedback sessions with patients to discuss their thoughts on the survey. The patients were all female and aged between 16-65yrs.

Table 2- Patients and Inpatient Units included

Treatment Centre	Type	Number of Patients who completed Questionnaire	Number of Patients who came to the Discussion
The Eden Unit, Aberdeen	Inpatient	6	4
Cotswold House, Oxford	Inpatient/Day Patient	7	5
Cotswold House, Marlborough	Inpatient	12	11

Results

The results were anonymised, and a total of 24 questionnaires were included in the final analysis.

- Negative comments and reduced numbers of likes on photos and posts appeared to lower the majority of patients' self esteem.

- Commenting on or liking a photo was the activity on social media that was undertaken most and carried the greatest interest for the majority of patient.

- 67% of patients untag themselves from posts and photos on social media with the majority citing negative body image and poor self esteem as the reason.

- 71% of patients took photos solely with the intention of posting them to social media.

- 79% of patients felt that social media had an impact on how they feel and look at themselves.

- 75% of patients felt that other people's use of social media impacted their EDs.

Discussion

Patients with EDs use social media as a platform for comparing to others. More interestingly, social media particularly social networking sites allows for comparison to all aspects of other peoples' lives and experiences which perpetuates feelings of low self worth and negative body image. Food pages and diet tips posted by others had negative consequences. The post questionnaire discussion also proved that patients are often aware of maladaptive uses but unaware of how to address this issue. Furthermore positive effects of social media use such as access to recovery pages and support groups were also identified.

Recommendations

Formal assessment of age and ethnic background may provide useful information in assessing whether social media use is different in particular patient populations. Moreover the sample size in this study was small so re-conducting the study with a larger sample size, and improved questionnaire would provide clearer data.

Conclusions

Specific uses of social media especially- those that are maladaptive in nature - can be seen to increase feelings of negativity, especially regarded to shape and weight in patients with eating disorder and promote eating disorder related behaviours. This therefore perpetuates the vicious mental cycle witnessed as part of an eating disorder. Hence, social media can negatively impact patients with eating disorders in triggering and maintaining the disease.

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